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Commuting couple: For lobbyist Eston "Dusty" Melton and Realtor Mabel Melton, Virgin Trains made it possible for them to move to West Palm Beach while working in Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties. (CONTRIBUTED/PALMBEACHPOST.COM)

Train service eases stress for West Palm Beach commuters

Virgin Trains, despite growing pains, is allowing West Palm Beach commuters to work in Miami with ease – but it isn't cheap.

By [Tony Doris](#)

WEST PALM BEACH — Mabel Melton, a longtime Miami-Dade County Realtor, had a great opportunity to work in her growing firm's new West Palm Beach office.

But she spent years building a clientele in Miami, and her husband, Eston "Dusty" Melton, also needed to be in Miami, as he lobbies officials in the Miami-Dade, Miami and Miami Beach governments and school district.

So, how to move forward without leaving business behind?

For the Meltons, and a growing number of South Florida professionals, [Virgin Trains provides the answer](#), allowing them to work in multiple counties without braving I-95 traffic for a stressful hour or two, or more.

“It made our move happen and made my business happen,” Mabel Melton said.

The Meltons bought a spacious house in West Palm Beach’s Bear Lakes community last November — at a price that would have been unheard for a comparable home down south -- and now commute by train to Miami.

He goes five days a week, taking a quick Uber ride from their house to the West Palm station. He keeps his car in Virgin’s Miami garage to travel to his business appointments.

She takes the train a few days a week. When she arrives in Miami, she Ubers to her mother’s house, where she, too, has a car.

They’re now building business in the two counties at the same time, and using the one-hour, 15-minute train ride to open laptops and get a head start on their days’ work.

What’s more, they go first class, or “Select,” which is roomier than the standard “Smart” and “Smart Plus” cars and includes wine and beer, which they find useful for the return trip.

“I arrive home more mellow than I would otherwise, which Mabel appreciates,” Dusty said. Mabel confirmed.

The express train line – known then as Brightline –opened for service in January 2018 between West Palm and Fort Lauderdale, a 35-minute stretch. The Fort Lauderdale-Miami link opened in May 2018. Orlando service, delayed by community opposition along the line, is scheduled to start by 2022.

Still in start-up mode, the service has yet to prove itself financially, reporting a \$28 million loss for the first quarter of 2019.

Perhaps more telling are its ridership projections.

Early on, Virgin projected to bond investors its 2019 ridership in South Florida would top 2.3 million, while revenue would eclipse \$112 million.

But as it turned out, through the first five months of 2019, Virgin Trains reported ridership of 401,226 and revenue of \$9.4 million.

Still, company officials say they’re confident they’ll overcome initial delays and financial performance will improve.

For customers, the ride isn't cheap, between train fares, garage or Uber costs. A half-dozen customers contacted for this article said it compared favorably to car travel when one considers what fuel, tolls and car maintenance would cost, and the trains' comfort.

Virgin Train's Media Director, Mike Hicks, also pointed to the value of working on WiFi while commuting.

Real estate agents can work on listings in multiple counties, as Mabel Melton does, and train-riding lawyers convert travel time into billable hours, Hicks said.

According to Hicks, the standard monthly pass between West Palm Beach and Miami is \$450. That equates to approximately \$11.25 per ride.

A yearly pass costs \$3,800.

Those numbers don't include the cost of taking a cab, Uber or Lyft for that so-called "last mile" between station and destination, or the cost of garaging a car at either terminus.

The garage costs \$80 a month for Jonathan Liguori, who commutes from Fort Lauderdale to his job as Apollo Bank's chief technology officer on Miami's Brickell Avenue. But he said there are ways to work the train price down. For example, he said, he takes advantage of deals that come up, such as a buy-two-months-get-one-month-free fare offer from Virgin.

Liguori said he used to live in Miami but the train made it easier for him to live in Fort Lauderdale.

The morning car ride wasn't so bad, because he would leave early. But he never knew what he'd encounter along the way, he said. And driving hundreds of miles a week on the interstate put wear and tear on his car, not to mention stress on him, he said.

"Going home it's made a big difference for me. What I really like is getting home at the same time every night. That's something new."

His company has helped, offering incentives to employees to leave cars at home.

Every Apollo Bank employee is eligible for one round-trip voucher to try the train this summer, for example, plus a \$5 Lyft credit.

The company worked out a corporate program with Virgin, which should save riders money on train rides and parking, a spokesman said. The bank also offered employees a \$125 credit to use towards a Metrorail Pass for their Miami connections.

"The benefit to me is the ability to work while I am on the train," said Gloria Ortega Rex, a Juno Beach resident who commutes to her job as vice president for finance and CFO at The Miami Foundation.

That and not having to venture onto I-95 at rush hour are the biggest advantages, she said.

“I also have made so many friends. There is a group of people who are regulars. It’s been very nice and they’re all professionals like me,” Rex said. “I’ve met a lot of very nice people.”

Among the regular commuters are two who rely upon car sales for a living.

Jose Santiago, E-Commerce Director at Braman Motor Cars, used to work at Braman in West Palm but was offered a promotion to the company’s Miami headquarters. Having the train made accepting the promotion easier, he said.

He still uses his car, when he’s leaving later in the morning and doesn’t have to buck rush hour. But the rest of the time, it’s the train, he said.

Similarly, Ricardo Plaza used to work at Braman’s Greenacres Honda dealership and got an offer to work at the main office as finance director for the Miami dealerships. He lives in suburban West Palm Beach, near Wellington.

“I have a house, a two-year-old, my whole life is there,” he said. “I was doing very well in the position I was in, so there was really no need for me to accept a promotion, though it was a great promotion, but the train made it much easier.

Costs aside, it’s just safer than driving, he added. “The times I do drive to work, for whatever reason, I see accidents up and down the turnpike and 95. It’s just treacherous. I don’t want to expose myself to that, driving 140 miles a day.”

In the morning he drives to the downtown West Palm station, finds his regular seat, fires up his laptop and works on his reports. “Some of my most productive work is done during that hour-and-15-minute commute, because I’m not interrupted by phone calls and people walking into my office,” Plaza said.

Disclosure: There is a corporate link between the train service and this news organization. All Aboard Florida, which operates Virgin Trains (formerly called Brightline), is owned by an affiliate of Fortress Investment Group LLC, a global investment management firm. Fortress Investment Group LLC is contracted to manage and advise New Media Investments Inc., which owns GateHouse Media, parent company of The Palm Beach Post.